Counterview

Rajiv Shah's News Blog

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Tracking a lost link: Soviet-era legacy of Gujarati translator Atul Sawani

By Rajiv Shah/ Friday, April 04, 2025

The other day, I received a message from a well-known activist, Raju Dipti, who runs an NGO called Jeevan Teerth in Koba village, near Gujarat's capital, Gandhinagar. He was seeking the contact information of Atul Sawani, a translator of Russian books—mainly political and economic—into Gujarati for Progress Publishers during the Soviet era. He wanted to collect and hand over scanned soft copies, or if possible, hard copies, of Soviet books translated into Gujarati to Arvind Gupta, who currently lives in Pune and is undertaking the herculean task of collecting and making public soft

copies of Soviet books that are no longer available in the market, both in English and Indian languages.

I informed Raju Dipti that I had disposed of all my Soviet books—something I recently did by giving away nearly all of them to an activist, Lankesh Chakravarty, who zealously runs a voluntary library in a chawl in Ahmedabad's predominantly Dalit locality in Odhav. I also told him that my wife, Shruti, was also a translator of literature into Gujarati in Moscow with Raduga Publishing House between 1986 and 1991, and that the person who introduced her to the publishing authorities happened to be Atul Sawani. I added that Atul had passed away a few years ago.

Meanwhile, Arvind Gupta contacted me to inquire about Atul, which took me back to our Moscow days when I was the foreign correspondent for the pro-Soviet Delhi daily, Patriot, from 1986 to 1993. He mentioned that he had collected and uploaded around 3,500 Soviet books and was looking for Russian books translated into Gujarati—one of the reasons he wanted Atul's contact. I repeated what I had told Raju Dipti, who had already forwarded a blog I had created, where I had preserved PDF copies of Shruti's published and unpublished Gujarati translations.

Atul joined Progress Publishers in Moscow in 1966. A veteran by the time we met him in 1986, he was one of the first people we befriended after arriving in Moscow. As I was a foreign correspondent representing Patriot, the small Indian diaspora of translators, of which Atul was a part, would often invite my wife, our little daughter Hina, and me to their gatherings.

We would frequently visit Atul's house more than others, and he and his wife, Kutsia, would visit ours. Kutsia was an excellent cook and host. Since scarcities, especially of food items, were common—a Soviet phenomenon that worsened over the years—she would share tips on how to manage. For instance, wheat flour was rarely available, and she taught us how to make chapati-like rotis by mixing maida with rye flour. These two products were more readily available. Indeed, the chapati could be prepared, which Shruti did, but it didn't taste as good—one reason we had to hunt for wheat flour. Russian women rarely bought it, calling it "coarse" and "dark." Whenever it was available, word would spread among the Indian diaspora about which shop was selling it. We would rush to buy as much as possible—up to 20 kg—to stock up.

Often, we had to make do with bread instead of chapati. Even good, fresh bread wasn't always available at Khleb, a shop near our residence. We had to time our visits to coincide with deliveries.

Atul became a central figure among Indian language translators, especially when mid-level but well-known Communist leaders visited Moscow—which happened quite frequently. They would invariably visit Atul, who would organize drinks-and-dinner gatherings at his residence, where I was often invited. I recall how, once, my little daughter—who was more fluent in Russian than most—mistakenly sipped vodka, thinking it was water, at Atul's residence.

Atul and Kutsia would often accompany us to various tourist spots in Moscow, but one of the most memorable visits was to Zagorsk, a renowned seat of the Russian Orthodox Church. We met Atul and Kutsia at Kursky Vokzal—the railway station within walking distance from our residence on Ulitsa Chkalova (later renamed Zimlyanoi Val), not far from the Kremlin and the Indian Embassy—to travel to Zagorsk. Atul and Kutsia came from their residence in Yugo-Zapadnaya (literally "South-West"), at the other end of Moscow. However, thanks to Moscow's efficient metro system, one of the best in the world, they reached Kursky Vokzal in just half an hour.

In those days, any foreigner working in a Soviet organization had to obtain mandatory permission to travel outside Moscow. Call it the Iron Curtain or whatever, but this rule was strictly enforced on Indian translators working at Progress or Raduga Publishing House. Zagorsk, though situated about 75 km outside Moscow, was one of the few towns exempted from this rule. No permission was needed if the trip was organized by the authorities, something that happened quite often to maintain employee morale.

Things were different for my family and me since I was an accredited foreign correspondent. I had to inform the Soviet Foreign Ministry's information department 24 hours in advance if I planned to travel outside Moscow. I had to specify the locations I intended to visit and where I would be staying, whether at a hotel or someone's residence.

Atul was always careful to stay on good terms with his bosses. Once, a Russian woman who worked at Radio Moscow's Gujarati section prepared a voluminous Russian-Gujarati dictionary. Before printing, it was sent to Shruti for review, and she firmly rejected it due to numerous typographical errors. For example, the Gujarati word lakdi (stick) was mistakenly written as lakri—because Russian lacks the letter "d." The dictionary was also sent to Atul for assessment, and he approved it with glowing remarks. When he learned that Shruti had given a negative review, he asked her, "Why antagonize the bosses? You wouldn't lose anything by giving a positive remark." We later heard that the dictionary was published with all its typographical mistakes intact!

Atul rarely spoke about his personal life, but once, he reminisced about his youth, telling me how he

would take Kutsia for bicycle rides before they married. He also revealed that "Atul Sawani" wasn't his real name. A Communist Party member, he had changed his public name to hide his identity when the party operated underground. He also shared his disdain for certain Gujarati scholars who sought to Sanskritize the language in pursuit of purity. "Gujarati, as spoken by the common people, includes many Persian words. That's where its beauty lies," he once told me.

Like other translators in Soviet publishing houses, Atul lost his job after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. While I returned to India in 1993, most aging translators stayed back—including Atul. I was told they had to plead with the new Russian authorities for pensions to make ends meet. Atul passed away in 2011 at the age of 85, after living in Moscow for nearly 45 years—about 25 of which he spent as a translator.